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Creolizing the Caribbean ‘Coolie’: A Biopolitical Reading of Indian Indentured Labourers and the Ethnaclass Hierarchyⁱ

From the 19th Century, the term ‘coolie’ has become synonymous with people who migrated to work as indentured labourers in the Caribbean and Americas, and the descendants of these labourers. The term itself is inherently transnational, projective and ambiguous, as Moon-Ho Jung has observed: ‘coolies were never a people or a legal category. Rather, coolies were a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined’ (Jung 2006: 5). The period of the transatlantic coolie trade extends from approximately the early 1840s to the 1920s. In areas of the Americas where any native inhabitants had been almost entirely eradicated, the term coolie came to signify those people who had arrived after the abolition of slavery, and who were neither African nor European in ethnic origin. As a result, groups of migrating people who reached the Americas of Chinese, Malaysian, Korean and Indian origin all became known as coolies; it is the latter group’s arrival in the Francophone Caribbean which will form the focus of the present analysis.

Exploring the etymology of the word coolie uncovers a set of overlapping racial and economic definitions, revealing a great deal about the ways in which these groups of migrating human beings were regarded. The most helpful exploration of the term is found in the work of a scholar of Chinese history and politics, Robert L. Irick, who himself refers back to a definition provided by Samuel Couling in 1917. Irick quotes Couling at some length: ‘The origin of the word is variously given, (i) Hindi, *Koli*, a race in India; (ii) Tamil, *Kuli*, wages; (iii) Turkish, *Kuli*, a slave. The name given by foreigners to Chinese laborers, navvies, menials, etc.’ (Irick 1977: 2–3). Irick goes on to cite the

Encyclopaedia Britannica to provide further evidence for the term's Indian origins: 'koli or kulo, an aboriginal race of western India; or perhaps from Tamil *kūli*' (Irick 1977: 3). The Hindi term *kulī* is still used to the present day to refer to a labourer or porter. Irick's discussion establishes itself as one of the most complete explorations of the term as he directly addresses the term's transnational valence (the French *Trésor de la langue française*, for example, privileges the Chinese association rather than the Indian connectionⁱⁱ), noting that it has been translated into the Chinese terms *Hua kung* or *chu-tsai*, the first meaning 'Chinese labourers', and the second 'human pigs' (Irick 1977: 4). Irick is unequivocal about the degraded status of these labourers, noting that the Chinese coolie trade was 'intended to and does in most respects equate to a slave trade in Chinese labourers' (Irick 1977: 5–6).

The presence of the coolie labourers disturbs a number of received truths about post-emancipation Caribbean – and European – societies. In the French context, the 1848 abolition of slavery, spearheaded by Victor Schœlcher in his capacity as Under-Secretary of State for the Marine and the Colonies, was heralded as the triumph of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, and as the inevitable consequence of French Republicanism ideology. These values had previously led to slavery's abolition, in 1794, during the early phases of revolutionary zeal in France, before Napoleon infamously reinstated slavery in 1802, and revolutionary principles bowed to economic logic. An analysis of the situation of the coolies reveals, for a second time, a historical moment when the great rhetorical principles which ushered in the definitive abolition of slavery in France are applied selectively, rather than universally, as it becomes evident that the governing principles at

work in the practice of indentureship are economic, rather than humanitarian. Schœlcher himself vociferously condemned the practice, commenting in 1885 that:

L'immigrant actuel n'est pas un homme ayant des droits civils. Il est réduit à l'état de mineur ne pouvant rien par lui-même. Mal nourri, mal vêtu, maltraité, frappé, il n'a pas le droit de porter plainte devant les tribunaux. Franchement, quelle différence y a-t-il entre un esclave et un engagé de cette sorte? (Schœlcher 1885)

The parallel between indenture and slavery traced by Schœlcher is compelling. The systematic dehumanization and animalization inherent both in the treatment of these migrant workers, and in the very evolution of the term coolie, combined with the burgeoning global financial systems which led to the transportation of hundreds of thousands of coolie workers, invite a new biopolitical reading of the depiction of the Indian indentured labourers who became known as coolies.

Biopolitics, 'Bare Life' and the Ethnaclass Hierarchy

Biopolitics offers a set of theories with which to study the new forms and ideologies of community in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, with particular attention to cultural identity, relation and hybridity, from the government of populations examined by Foucault, to the politics of migration and diaspora. From the sixteenth century, the Caribbean region can be considered to have played the role of a biopolitical laboratory, where tools and devices of what the Italian philosopher Giorgio

Agamben terms 'inclusive exclusion', such as the government of populations and thanatopolitics, were developed. The Caribbean constitutes a paradigmatic *chronotope* (to use Bakhtin's term) for the application of biopolitical devices: animalization, reification, ethnic rape and torture. Moreover, biopolitics offers a conceptual framework for analysing those people who are located outside mainstream society: those who find themselves on the outer fringes of modernization's scope, who lie on the periphery or are excluded from the modern drive towards materialism, prosperity and abundance, and who are, instead, trapped in a cycle of degradation. In 1995, these excluded groups became the focus of a major biopolitical text, *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* by Agamben, translated into English in 1998 as *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

In the figure of *homo sacer* (sacred man), Agamben revisits an archaic Roman legal concept which referred to a person who could be killed with impunity; a person who was banned from the politico-legal community and reduced to the status of mere physical existence. Agamben urges that *homo sacer* is still relevant to our era, as the figure represents 'bare life', which he theorizes as life which '*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*' [original emphasis] (Agamben 1998: 8). Using this figure to draw a distinction between *zoē*, bare life, and *bíos*, political existence, Agamben argues that *homo sacer* is human life excluded from the protection of the law, and draws on examples from medieval times, through to Holocaust victims and contemporary asylum seekers, to illustrate the concept. Agamben also develops *homo sacer* in order to discuss 'the camp', which he defines as '*the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule*' [original emphasis] (Agamben 1998: 169). This has proved

highly influential in political science, particularly in the wake of post-9/11 politics and the creation of a more modern kind of biopolitical camp in the Caribbean, Guantanamo Bay.

In particular, turning to a Francophone postcolonial context, Agamben explores the example of the imploring child visible in 1990s fundraising posters for the victims of the Rwandan genocide, a figure he reads as the ‘cipher of bare life’ (Agamben 1998: 133). The defenceless infant stands for bare life, as it is representative of groups which are, without any doubt, being killed. Yet western hegemonic political discourse cannot condone any such killing: the child’s life cannot be seen to be knowingly sacrificed. For Agamben, this child ‘may well be the most telling contemporary cipher of bare life that humanitarian organizations, in perfect symmetry with state power, need’ (Agamben 1998: 133–34). Implicit in these structures of power is a hollow parallelism, as ‘a humanitarianism separated from politics cannot fail to reproduce the isolation of sacred life at the basis of sovereignty’ (Agamben 1998: 134). Politics and humanitarianism are required to work together towards the same objectives for any meaningful change to be enacted; otherwise the display and recognition of vulnerability becomes a falsely reassuring shorthand, which might prompt charitable donations, but which does not by any means ensure longer-term political intervention.

Biopolitics in general, and Agamben’s arguments about ‘bare life’ in particular, offer an important framework with which to read the numerous ways in which race and violence are connected in fictional, historical and anthropological writing about coolies, allowing specific attention to be paid to strategies of dehumanization. Biopolitics operates at a global level through the governance of populations, as well as at a local

level through the development of the ethnoclass hierarchy in plantation society. Harnessing biopolitics as a manner of reading literature and history in a transnational mode raises and addresses fundamental questions about *why* and *how* bodies are reduced to the precarious status of ‘bare life’, a status which simultaneously acknowledges that life should not be sacrificed, while placing it in conditions which render it at its most vulnerable. This entails a reconsideration of *why* and *how* bodies are moved, transported, put to work, encouraged or discouraged to reproduce, and ultimately disposed of.

The French Caribbean Ethnoclass Hierarchy

In her major study of creolization in the French Caribbean, Doris Garraway demonstrates how, in the colonial era, *métissage* was not only the site of fear, desire, rape and colonial fantasy, but also had dimensions which she terms ‘biopolitical’, attributing such dimensions to ‘the conflict between the interracial sexual libertinage of the ruling elite and the threat posed by a proliferating mixed-race population that contested white claims to superiority’ (Garraway 2005a: 247). Mixed-race sexual encounters led to the development of the ethnoclass hierarchy, a structure which continues to influence Caribbean society to the present day. The Martinican critic Chantal Maignan-Claverie defines the term ‘ethnoclasse’ as a concept which ‘caractérise les sociétés coloniales et postcoloniales où la hiérarchie sociale recoupe une stratification raciale. Il devient opératoire dès que l’idéologie coloriste, corollaire du système économique de la Plantation et du commerce du sucre devient prépondérante’ (Maignan-Claverie 1999: 7). Race and social class, and particularly, as Maignan-Claverie points out, economics, have become bound together in the ethnoclass hierarchy to create a new biopolitical order.

The lower rungs of the ethnoclass hierarchy are occupied by poor black people, who are widely referred to in literature (for example, in Joseph Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres*) as the *petit-nègre* class. At the top are rich white people, known as *békés* (in Martinique) or *blancs-pays* (in Guadeloupe). In addition, a wide range of mixed-race categories such as *chabin*, *mulâtre* and *câpresse* exist. These three terms in particular repay closer analysis as their etymology reveals an inherent animalization. Most famously, the term *mulâtre* (and the English borrowed term mulatto) derives from the Portuguese and Spanish word *mulato*, which means mule: a mule is the infertile offspring of interbreeding between a horse and a donkey. A *chabin* was a type of Norman sheep with reddish hair, and *câpresse* comes from the Latin term *capra*, meaning goat (Maignan-Claverie 1999: 62).

This systematic biopolitical practice of naming groups of people after animals, and thereby consecrating their status as being outside humanity, is a pronounced feature of *métissage* in the Caribbean. It is indicative of the namers' (i.e. the white Europeans') mania for inferiorizing non-white groups through extended categorization, the act of naming becoming a manner of controlling these groups and permanently reminding them of their subaltern position in the dominant power structures. Given the population imbalance between the dominant white group and the increasing non-white population, this means of control was important both psychologically and legally, as a method of defining (and minimizing) the legal status of people of mixed race.

The ethnoclass hierarchy's historical development can be better understood by turning to early colonial texts about the French Caribbean, as exemplified by the work of Moreau de Saint-Méry. Moreau published *Description de la partie française de l'isle*

Saint-Domingue in 1797, an encyclopaedic text which is remarkable for its attempts to produce a ‘calculus of colour’.ⁱⁱⁱ He ‘defines’ the different combinations of races, which result in eleven categories: *Blanc*, *Nègre*, *Mulâtre*, *Quarteron*, *Métis*, *Mamelouc*, *Quarteronné*, *Sang-mêlé*, *Sacatra*, *Griffe* and *Marabou*. This is set out in a series of tables, with each column defining the result of any of the possible ‘couplings’ within those eleven categories. In this way, he generates and lists over one hundred possible ‘products’ of interracial encounters. This astonishing document testifies to the anxiety generated by race and mixed-race unions, and the way that this perceived threat was countered by actions which we might now read as biopolitical attempts to define, and thereby control, the status of mixed-race children. This anxiety proved well-founded in the context of 1790s Saint-Domingue: before Moreau was able to publish his analysis of society in Saint-Domingue, the Haitian Revolution began, sweeping away the world he had so minutely detailed through a revolution in which people of mixed-race played a major role.

Positioning the Coolie in the French Caribbean

It is into this specific biopolitical context, in which race, economics and reproduction had become bound together, that coolie indentured labourers arrived. Indentured labour, or in French, ‘engagement’, had been the initial method used in the seventeenth century by European colonizers to populate the new colonies with French *paysans*. The failure of this scheme was followed by the implementation of mass scale transatlantic slavery. In the British Empire, the 1833 Abolition Act came into force on 1st August 1834, and in the French Caribbean, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, abolition came into effect in May

1848, two months before the official Parisian administrative schedule, precipitated by slave uprisings in the islands (Jennings 2000: 282–283). After the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean, indentured labourers were once again recruited as a result of the post-abolition labour shortage, but now European empires looked further afield, to their eastern colonial holdings.

During the period 1838–1917, an estimated total of 538,642 Indians migrated as indentured labourers from India to the Caribbean.^{iv} The British colonies received the greatest number of coolie workers from India (British Guiana: 238,909; Trinidad: 143,939 and Jamaica: 36,420). The French Caribbean colonies were also supplied with significant numbers of Indian indentured labourers. Most migrated to Guadeloupe, which received 42,326; Martinique also received 25,509. In contrast, French Guiana received a far smaller share of just 6,551 indentured labourers (quite possibly because by this time, it was primarily a penal colony). These statistics place the total number of coolies who migrated from India to the French Caribbean at 74,386. In addition, there was a considerable influx of Indian migrants to the Indian Ocean islands, and in the Francophone context, significant ‘coolie’ populations arrived in Mauritius (453,063) and Reunion (100,000) (Mehta 2010: 3). To this day, these islands have large communities of Indian descent.^v

Significant differences exist between Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean perceptions of coolies. In the Anglophone Caribbean, authors of Indian descent have become canonical figures in the field now increasingly referred to as postcolonial and World Literature, including Nobel Prize Winner V. S. Naipaul, whose novels *The Mimic Men* and *A House for Mr Biswas* feature Indo-Trinidadian heroes (or antiheroes), raising

the visibility of the Indian diaspora in the Anglophone Caribbean. Similarly, Sam Selvon and David Dabydeen have become celebrated authors whose works illustrate different aspects of the Indian diaspora.

In Francophone Caribbean literature, coolie authors, and indeed coolie protagonists, have occupied a much more ambiguous, subaltern position (Toumson: 1994). Until recently, 'the academic focus has remained resolutely on the experiences of Indian immigrants to British colonies, or concentrated upon the marginalization of Indian ethnicity in the post-abolition societies which developed in both the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean' (Marsh 2012: 222). Marsh is one of a growing number of literary critics who are beginning to explore cultural representations of the Indian diaspora in the Francophone Caribbean, and a notable landmark was the publication of a special number of the journal *L'Esprit Créateur* edited by Brinda Mehta and Renée Larrier on 'Indianités francophones/ Indian Ethnoscapes in Francophone Literature' in 2010. Mehta in particular has drawn attention to *Kala Pani* or 'black water' narratives which relate the 'crossing of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans by thousands of economically disenfranchised Indian agricultural workers' (Mehta 2010: 1). A significant body of anthropological work also exists on the Indian presence in the French Caribbean (for example, Benoist et al, 2004).

In addition to the Martinican authors Confiant and Virassamy, several other French Antillean writers have highlighted the Indian presence in the Francophone Caribbean, although the majority remain marginal voices. Indentured labourers from India arrived in Guadeloupe in greater numbers than in Martinique, and unsurprisingly, their representation in Guadeloupe has to date been more significant. For example,

Maryse Condé provides a detailed portrayal of the Indian community in Guadeloupe in *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989). Other Guadeloupean authors who have engaged with this community include Ernest Moutoussamy (whose novels *Il pleut dans mon pays*, 1979, and *Aurore*, 1987, explore the Indian diaspora in the French Caribbean), Dany Bébel-Gisler (in a notable text for children, *Grand-mère, pourquoi Sundari est venue en Guadeloupe: l'arrivée des premiers Indiens en Guadeloupe*, 2005) and Arlette Minatchy-Bogat (*Terre d'exil et d'adoption*, 2000); in addition, the well-known author Ernest Pépin explores coolie culture (particularly in *Coulée d'or*, 1995, his *récit d'enfance*). Further Martinican authors include Camille Moutoussamy (*Eclats d'Inde*, 2003), Christiane Sacarabani (*L'Indien au sang noir*, 2003) and Laure Moutoussamy (*Le 'Kooli' de morne cabri*, 2007). In turn, the 2001 global bestseller *Life of Pi* by French Canadian author Yann Martel provides a rare depiction in Anglophone literature of the French presence in India, specifically Pondicherry. Ang Lee's 2012 Oscar-winning film adaptation vividly brought to life the hybrid cultural influences still present in this former French *comptoir*.

In an important anthropological study of Indian culture in the Francophone Caribbean, the authors note that this culture has left a 'trace limitée qui s'explique par la perception jadis de l'Indien comme élément tiers, tard venu jouant un rôle controversé dans le jeu colonial' (Benoist et al 2004: 50). Why might the situation of Francophone Caribbean coolies have been sidelined to such an extent, in contrast with the situation in Anglophone Caribbean colonies, where Indian culture achieved a more prominent status several decades ago? From the very moment of arrival in the French Caribbean, the presence of Indian indentured labourers creates an inconvenient conflict with the French Republican framework. For example, the dubious recruitment practices and deplorable

living conditions stand in stark contrast to the republican values mobilized in the 1848 declaration of abolition. Coolies contradict the official narratives of the post-1848 period, as their stories demonstrate that the social and moral progress which abolition was thought to herald, did not prevent the rapid creation of a second transatlantic, or rather transoceanic form of human exploitation in its place. The situation further illustrates Agamben's theory, as the schism between republican abolitionist rhetoric and the treatment of the coolies reduces this group to the precarious status of bare life, a group which, in line with republican ideals, cannot knowingly be sacrificed, but who are denied any political agency and condemned to a pitiful existence.

The absence of coolie figures in Francophone Caribbean identity discourses is another contributing factor: the situation of coolies is left unexplored by *négritude*, most likely as a consequence of its emphasis on African ancestry as a unifying ideology, leading Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo to comment that 'dans le cas des Antilles, ce sont peut-être plus les voix noires que les voix blanches qui ont fini de confisquer la parole indienne' (Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo 2011: 428). Even Glissant's *antillanité*, which moved away from ideas of locating Caribbean culture in African origins in order to read the islands themselves within a logic of openness and creolization, sidelines references to coolies or their culture. Since 1989, the movement of *créolité* has played a major role in reconceptualizing the coolie in Francophone Caribbean culture. *Créolité's* manifesto, *Eloge de la créolité*, published in 1989 and co-written by the novelists Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant and the linguistics professor Jean Bernabé, places great emphasis on acknowledging the cultural diversity of Creole societies from its famous opening declaration: 'Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques, nous nous

proclamons Créoles’ (Bernabé et al 1989: 13). In an important section on developing a ‘vision intérieure’ (Bernabé et al 1989: 38), the authors add: ‘La Créolité est l’agrégat interactionnel ou transactionnel, des éléments culturels caraïbes, européens, africains, asiatiques, et levantins, que le joug de l’Histoire a réunis sur le même sol’ (Bernabé et al 1989: 26).

It is through works by the authors of *créolité* that coolies really make their appearance into Francophone Caribbean literature. Nonetheless, this generally takes the form of rather stereotypical, two-dimensional tokenism. For example, characters scattered throughout the novels of Chamoiseau and Confiant include the Syrian peddler and the hard-working Chinese businessman. In contrast, the way in which Indian-origin coolie characters are stereotyped is particularly interesting for its biopolitical dimensions. There are abundant references (which will be further explored in the analysis which follows) to the stereotype of the seductive coolie woman who is unfailingly defined by the claim that her pubic hair will cut any man who goes near her, a warning which has unmistakable biopolitical resonances, and the coolie labourer is repeatedly typecast as a character who must endure the constant, dehumanizing taunt *coolie mangé chien*.

Exploitation, racism and *créolité* in Confiant’s *La Panse du chacal*

Fifteen years after the publication of *Eloge*, Confiant’s novel *La Panse du chacal* is at great pains to reposition the coolie’s story in Caribbean culture, reclaiming it from the margins. Confiant’s literature is largely inspired by specific Martinican historical events and locations. His first novel written in French (rather than Creole), *Le nègre et l’Amiral* (1988), is set in Vichy-occupied Martinique during World War Two, *Nuée*

ardente (2002) discusses the devastating 1902 eruption of Mount Pelée, while his recent publication *L'Hôtel du bon plaisir* (2009) is set in the historic Terres-Sainville district of Fort-de-France. *La Panse du chacal* can be situated in this line of historical novels, and its publication in 2004 was deliberately timed to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

The novel follows three generations of the Dorassamy family, focusing on father Adhiyamân, his wife Devi and their adopted son, Vinesh. After a series of personal trials and traumas, Adhiyamân signed up as an indentured labourer to escape a famine-ridden life of extreme poverty in India. In the second half of the nineteenth century, factors such as famine, the demise of traditional industries, relocated local economies, rising rents (and evictions) and widespread unemployment acted as push factors to leave India (Vertovec 1992). In *La Panse du chacal*, the effects of this devastating economic shift are explicitly linked with colonialism:

Depuis peu, en effet, l'Anglais déversait sur tout le pays des vêtements imités des modèles traditionnels mais cousus, ce qui était une grave entorse aux interdits religieux. Ils étaient trois fois moins chers que ce qui se fabriquait dans le pays [...] Bientôt, le peuple en son entier ne jura plus que par le mot 'Lancashire', qui désignait la région d'Angleterre d'où provenait cette marchandise du diable' (pp. 41–42).

Interconnected global economic systems, only enabled by colonialism, are influencing and creating new connections between distant regions. In the process, what had

previously been local markets become irrevocably altered, their former patterns of trade and exchange destroyed, leading to the creation of vast disparities of wealth. This section is reminiscent of Glissant's comments on the triumph of European sugar beet, which he reads as a major factor in post-1945 Martinique becoming 'une colonie de consommation' (Glissant 1997 [1981]: 102). Confiant and Glissant repeatedly draw attention to the biopolitical dimensions of globalization, as a force which governs how and where large groups of people suddenly can – or can no longer – live.

The catalyst to Adhiyamân's decision to leave India occurs one terrible day when, starving, he is reduced to stealing rice from a rat hole to feed himself and his family. He returns home with the rice to find that his impoverished parents have both been attacked by jackals. Too weak to fight them off, his parents are eaten alive in a graphic and appalling scene (pp. 46–48). This is the pivotal episode referred to in the novel's title, *La Panse du chacal*. The title literally means the jackal's paunch, and is a quotation from a 1907 work *Dans l'Inde du Sud (le Coromandel)* by the French author and entomologist, Maurice Maindron. Maindron also provides the novel's epigraph: 'Mieux vaut émigrer aux Antilles [...] que de mourir d'inanition au tournant d'un chemin et d'avoir pour sépulture la panse du chacal.' The very real threat of starvation provides the impetus to emigrate: it is a choice between a slow, living death of starvation and eventually feeding the jackal's paunch, or leaving India.

The narrative then focuses on the ship voyage to Martinique undertaken by Adhiyamân and his new wife Devi. It is made abundantly clear that the couple are duped into signing up, as they are told:

Tout ce que tu auras à faire là-bas [...] ce sera étendre du sucre au soleil.
Ce n'est pas un travail fatigant. D'ailleurs, tu sera logé, nourri et payé,
sans compter qu'au bout de cinq ans tu seras rapatrié aux frais de la
Compagnie des Indes' (p. 55).

Historical archive supports the theory that many coolies were deliberately misled into becoming indentured labourers, with documented evidence that the companies who were taking on coolie indentured labourers felt no moral responsibility to explain where they were headed, or what indentureship entailed. For example, following an enquiry about obtaining indentured labourers to work on British Caribbean colonies by Sir John Gladstone (a planter in British Guiana and father of the British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone), the positive response from the firm of Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. in Calcutta demonstrated a complete disregard for the subjects of indentureship: 'We are not aware that any greater difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies, the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they go to or the length of the voyage they are undertaking' (Vertovec 1995: 57).

La Panse du chacal dedicates long sections to the transoceanic crossings of first the Pacific Passage (the Indian Ocean), and then the Middle Passage (the Atlantic Ocean), with careful descriptions of the inhumane conditions aboard the coolie ship. This expands the field of writing about the Middle Passage, which 'is (or should be) one of the prime figures in the collective memory of the modern world' (Miller 2008: 49). The infamous transatlantic crossing of the slave ship was, as Miller explains, 'for the captives not merely a stage in a profitable scheme but the imposition of a permanent exile' (Miller

2008: 50). Confiant draws a sensitive comparison between these horrific experiences of enforced transportation. In so doing, the narrative appears to be challenging the rhetoric of victimization: this is a text which demonstrates that no race holds the monopoly of suffering. In addition, the novel is particularly significant for the ways in which it develops an understanding of colonialism as a transnational world system, providing biopolitical insights about *who* has power over bodies, while also raising uncomfortable questions about the value, both monetary and metaphorical, of human lives in a capitalist world system.

The occupants of the cargo hold endure a terrible storm as they round the Cape of Good Hope, their below-deck suffering rapidly giving way to abject terror. This storm scene has a literary precedent in a turn-of-the-century short story by Joseph Conrad, 'Typhoon', set onboard a coolie ship carrying Chinese workers. The short story exemplifies the dehumanization of the ship's human cargo, and its climax is the eponymous typhoon, yet as description after description follows of the coolies attempting to survive every pitch and roll of the ship, crammed below deck, their determination to survive and the narrative's lingering attention to the injuries they endure undermine the constant affirmations that they are a sub-human race. Conrad and Confiant both remind the reader that human life repeatedly resists attempts to reduce it to a monetary value.

When Adhiyamân's family eventually arrives in Martinique, they discover the harsh reality of plantation life. In addition, they must endure the disdain of the black workers. In Confiant's text, the reasons for this disdain are manifold – in part, it can be ascribed to jealousy at the arrival of new groups whose physical appearance seems more attractive, provoking a racist reaction amongst the black community. Furthermore,

African Caribbeans regard the coolies as upholding the capitalist system of plantation exploitation which, in a post-abolition society, these newly emancipated black citizens are trying to challenge:

[...] certains n'hésitaient pas à incendier les champs de canne à la veille de la récolte. Le temps-esclavage est fini, ressassaient-ils chaque fois qu'un gérant ou un commandeur leur faisait une remarque. Tandis que les hindous, eux, étaient venus dans ce pays spécialement pour travailler et ne discutaient presque jamais les ordres [...] (pp. 52–3).

Confiant frames African Caribbean racism towards Indian coolies as a politico-economic reaction, because their passivity and labour uphold the existing status quo of *béké* rule. After Adhiyamân and Devi's marriage eventually breaks down and she is left a single parent, it is significant that she embarks on a new mixed-race relationship with a black union leader who is organizing strikes against the *békés*. At the close of the novel, she is pregnant with his baby, and her adopted son Vinesh has embarked on his own mixed-race relationship with a black woman, Firmine.

Confiant's novel operates according to a logic of doubling: by exploring the coolies, who are presented as the othered other, new perspectives on race can be explored, in which the victimized African Caribbeans themselves become the perpetrators of racism and discrimination. Confiant contextualizes this racism as a component of plantation society which arises precisely due to the unique way in which race and economics intersect in new world society. The description of the sugar mill,

known as 'l'usine' throughout the Francophone Caribbean, describes a vast all-encompassing biopolitical domain:

L'Usine n'est jamais loin. On aperçoit ses tourelles au moindre tournant. Ses longs bras maigres happent les chargements de canne dans le ventre des cabrouets et des tracteurs pour la pesée. Au-dedans, elle est une cathédrale sombre sans vitraux ni vasques dorées. Des chutes de lumière tombent des échancrures du toit de tôle ondulée, nimbant les bielles et les immenses roues dentelées de fines pincées de safran. On marche en silence entre les moulins-broyeurs qui tintamarrent à qui mieux mieux, les cuiseurs qui soufflent comme des crapauds-buffles et les cheminées qui ricanent, cigare au bec. Visser, dévisser, avec des outils de géant, se fait en cinq sec [sic]. [original emphasis] (p. 64)

The omnipresent, menacing and inescapable sugar mill is personified, while, simultaneously, and as a direct consequence, man is dehumanized. In this post-industrial revolution world, it becomes impossible to distinguish the boundary between machinery and humanity, and in its detailed portrait of the sugar mill, *La Panse du chacal* is reminiscent of Zola's industrial coal-mining descriptions in *Germinal*. The human body itself is in constant danger – and ultimately, expendable – in this industrial landscape:

On ne s'attarde pas. Flâner ou rêvasser, c'est mettre son corps en danger. Tant de doigts broyés, de mains sectionnées, de visages lacérés ou brûlés

vifs par la vapeur respirée de trop près! Entre l'armature des machines et la tuyauterie qui serpente de partout, les hommes ne sont plus que des ombres improbables qui semblent obéir à une volonté obscure ou peut-être à quelque dieu jaloux ou trop méfiant. [original emphasis] (p. 64)

In turn, this sugar mill machinery cannot exist without its own double, the sugar-cane plantation, which the narrator terms 'la sœur siamoise de l'Usine' (p. 65), another domain of biopolitical control. In a passage related from the perspective of Adhiyamân and Devi's adopted child Vinesh during his first day of work in the *petites-bandes* (the youngest group of plantation workers who carry out the more basic tasks), cane-cutting also emerges as an all-encompassing system:

Devant, loin devant, je distinguais les gestes précis des hommes qui coupaient les tiges de canne en trois morceaux qu'ils jetaient prestement sur le sol. Les amarreuses qui les suivaient se précipitaient pour rassembler ces derniers [...] un bougre au crâne tête-coco-sec battaient un tambour avec un rythme si-tellement entraînant que même les coupeurs de canne indiens tentaient d'y accorder le mouvement de leur corps. (p. 134)

The workers – both black and coolie – appear to be part of a rhythmic, giant machine, working in perfect synchronization. Confiant's depictions of the plantation and sugar-mill are strongly reminiscent of the Cuban author and theorist Antonio Benítez-Rojo's observations in *The Repeating Island* of the 'Plantation' machine, 'capitalized to indicate

not just the presence of plantations but also the type of society that results from their use and abuse' (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 9). He adopts the notion of the 'machine' from Deleuze and Guattari, employing it to draw attention to capitalist world systems and the fundamental role played by the Caribbean in global affairs throughout modern history. His reading is particularly illuminating as to the biopolitical dimensions of this Plantation machine, the 'mercantilist laboratory' of Europe (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 5) which required the mass transportation of 'no fewer than ten million African slaves and thousands of coolies (from India, China, and Malaysia)' (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 9) to fuel a system characterized by a 'rapid dynamic' and an 'intense measure of exploitation' (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 42). Without directly using the term biopolitics, Benítez-Rojo and Confiant highlight the new kinds of biopolitical societies which emerged under slavery, focusing on the exploitative disregard for human life which accompanied the nascent, flourishing capitalist world-system.

The technique of doubling is also present in the depiction of race. The narrative describes the similarities between the caste system which the Indians had observed in India, and the ethnoclass hierarchy which they discover in Martinique:

Au fond, le monde créole était pareil au nôtre avec ses castes et ses interdits, c'est-à-dire tout en haut, les Békés-brahmanes, au milieu les mulâtres-*vaishya*, en bas les Nègres-*shudra* et encore plus bas, nous autres, les Indiens-parias [...] sauf qu'aucune divinité n'en avait, comme en Inde, décidé ainsi. Ou plutôt, ici, dans ce pays, l'Etre Immense était la canne à sucre. (p. 197)

Once again, the text draws attention to the way race is used as an ordering and hierarchical concept to draw parallels between the situation of the coolie and the nègre. However, there is an important difference. Whereas Indian castes are ‘divine’, the ethnoclass hierarchy in the Caribbean is a man-made financial, biopolitical creation. Again, this recalls the financial aspect observed by Maignan-Claverie in her definition of ethnoclasses as coming into existence when ‘l’idéologie coloriste, corollaire du système économique de la Plantation et du commerce du sucre devient prépondérante’ (full quotation already provided above). This biopolitical conceptualization of the ethnoclass hierarchy as a phenomenon created and sustained by agricultural exploitation on the plantation renders capitalism’s role unmistakable – sugar is king, or even a blasphemous ‘Etre Immense’, and all those in the ethnoclass hierarchy must bow to it.

La Panse du chacal narrates a journey which commences in India and ends in the Caribbean. Echoing the words of Schœlcher, the narrative is quite clear that indentureship is slavery under another name and the coolie figure may be read as a cipher of bare life; despite the promise of a return to India, the economic system is shown time and again to be biased against the coolie worker, who often falls into the plantation owner’s debt and is consequently forced to re-indenture himself. The novel depicts the exploitation of coolie migrants, the racial confrontation and appalling economic situation which awaits them in Martinique, before working through a series of processes of doubling, to create an identification between the destiny of the transported African and the coolie. There is, then, a certain cultural ‘rapprochement’ at work in *La Panse du chacal*, whose novel is written under the sign of *créolité*, and steeped in the movement’s belief in the liberating

potential of an increased cultural celebration of *métissage*. This becomes all the more pronounced in the final pages, as the narrator describes the as yet unborn child of Devi and her black partner as ‘ce fils de l’Inde et de l’Afrique qui ne pourrait se réclamer que d’un seul pays: la Martinique’ (p. 344). The narrator thus predicts that *métissage* will begin to break down racial and cultural barriers and that this mixed-race ‘coolie noir’ will be as Martinican as any other ethnic group. Yet the analysis of a second, earlier text about the Francophone Caribbean coolie experience in the mid-twentieth century will challenge the optimistic *créoliste* reading of *métissage*.

***Le Petit Coolie noir* by Maurice Virassamy**

Maurice Virassamy’s *Le Petit Coolie noir* was published in 1972, and has long been neglected by critics, despite its status as one of the first Francophone Caribbean works to examine the coolies’ situation. The Martinican author Virassamy uses the genre of the *récit d’enfance*, or childhood memoir, to voice the experiences of a child whose family has both Indian and African ancestry: termed a ‘coolie noir’. Mixed-race unions of this nature can be found across the Caribbean, and in Anglophone areas, the term ‘dougla’ is used to describe mixed-race Caribbean people of both African and Indian descent (in contrast, the Francophone Caribbean has not developed a specific term for this kind of *métissage*). *Dougla* can be traced to Hindi, where it refers to inter-caste mixing and has pejorative connotations, which to an extent abide in the Anglophone Caribbean usage of the term. However, in a rare consideration of the potential, both ontological and metaphorical, of the term for Francophone Caribbean identity discourses, Mehta (2010: 7–8) calls for a reconsideration of the status of the *dougla* in order to redress ‘the lack of cultural and theoretical “intimacy” between Indians and Africans.’

Maurice's childhood contradicts Confiant's optimistic ending in *La Panse du chacal*, which concludes in early 20th century Martinique with the implication that mixed-race relationships will lead to mixed-race children who are all equally Creole, suggesting divisions will be gradually eroded with each new generation. In stark contrast to Confiant's optimistic view of métissage, Virassamy's discussion of his 1940s childhood focuses on the racism he encounters precisely due to his mixed-race identity. The 'petit coolie noir', Maurice, who narrates his life story, finds himself at the bottom of the complex socio-ethnic hierarchy, and the treatment he receives reveals a number of dehumanizing strategies at work.

The text opens with a brief scene set in France. An argument with Anna, a jealous lover, angers Maurice to the point of physical violence, and he strikes her. Yet he is shocked when rather than criticizing him – justly – for his violence, his lover reproaches him with the racial slur 'sale nègre' (p. 14). This incident triggers other, latent memories of the racism to which he was subjected during his childhood in the island he refers to as Madinina (an Amerindian word for Martinique). In childhood, Maurice recalls, the situation was reversed, because unlike Anna, the African Caribbean population of Martinique viewed him as other, an outsider, who emphatically did not belong to the racial group of the 'nègre'. He comments that there, he had to endure the racial taunt 'coolie mangé chien' because of his 'origine aux trois quarts hindoue' (pp. 14–15). His violent outburst towards Anna leads the narrator to acknowledge that he has been psychologically scarred by his experiences of racism in his native island. Her words remind him that his mixed-race identity means that the two ethnic groups with which he most often comes into contact – African Caribbean and white – both react to him with

hostility which he must bear ‘sans pouvoir jamais bénéficier du mérite éventuel d’un quelconque rameau ethnique de l’humanité’ rendering him a racially indeterminate scapegoat: ‘voici que des flèches blanches, destinées à mes anciens tortionnaires mentaux, étaient également dirigées contre moi’ (p. 15).

Thus opens a protracted reflection on the psychopathology of racism and its roots in childhood. As a mixed-race ‘coolie-noir’, Maurice is repeatedly rejected by his black Caribbean compatriots, and his situation in no way mitigated by his African ancestry. This is exemplified when the narrator comments that, at school, his black peers automatically expect him to lose in playground fights:

Psychologiquement, je parlais avec un gros handicap car les gens disaient que jamais un coolie n’avait battu un nègre. J’avais certes 20% [sic] de la race noire en moi, mais à leurs yeux, j’étais à jamais diminué par mon côté hindou. (pp. 61–62)

The child’s very decision to apportion his racial identity into 20% ‘blackness’ and 80% ‘Indianness’ is in itself indicative of how deeply ingrained the ethnoclass hierarchy continues to be in 1940s Martinique. Moreover, it appears a purposefully complex division, as one coolie grand-parent would result in 25%, not 20%, black identity - is this the narrator acknowledging that his black ancestor was herself not racially ‘pure’? Or is it a typographical error, given that in the *avant-propos*, Maurice has defined himself as three-quarters coolie? In any case, the very inclusion of such percentages is reminiscent of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s 18th-century racial discourse, and the child’s evident

conditioning to equate certain racial identities with superiority or inferiority is highly troubling.

The mixed-race coolie noir is always the racial outsider: rather than benefiting from two cultural groups with whom he can identify, he most often feels completely insecure about any of his heritage. When he visits Indian relatives, it is his African heritage which causes him to feel inadequate:

Cela m'ennuyait un peu, parce qu'on m'avait tellement traité de coolie, que j'étais gêné de me trouver parmi d'autres coolies et, qui plus est, de pure souche. Ils avaient de beaux cheveux noirs et plats et des traits fins. Je me serais sans doute plu parmi eux sans ce satané complexe. (p. 63)

Repeatedly inferiorized and insulted ('traité de coolie'), the narrator has now internalized his own inferiority. His descriptions of his Indian relatives echo colonial racist clichés in their subtle, implied denigration of black African features, as the narrator now finds his Indian family are more closely aligned with western notions of beauty. Maurice is unable to identify with any racial group, an outsider even in his own family.

Maurice begins to view the racism of the African Caribbean community towards coolies as symptomatic of the inhumanity to which they themselves had been subjected. He decides that the origins of this racism lie both in the historical past of slavery and:

[...] la notion aggravante de races prétendues inférieures. Certes il ne me fut pas donné dans mon enfance d'assister au spectacle du knout s'abattant sur

des dos décharnés, mais les séquelles psychiques d'un passé inhumain étaient reconnaissables en tous lieux. (p. 183)

He presents the psychic consequences of slavery as unhealed, violent, scars, comparing them to the wounds inflicted by the Russian knout, a metal whip, and transmitted across generations. In *Le Petit Coolie noir*, it is particularly striking that Maurice learns of the slave past in a scene of traumatic biopolitical detail, when his father clinically explains the purpose of a mysterious small cement construction in the ground:

De près on lui reconnaissait deux parties: l'une était un lourd couvercle rectangulaire en ciment, accolé à l'autre, sorte de parallélépipède rectangle fixé au sol. Mon père m'avait appris que l'intérieur de l'ensemble avait la forme d'une femme enceinte. Par un trou du couvercle on faisait couler l'eau d'un robinet visible au-dessus. C'est de cette façon que les esclavagistes se débarrassaient des domestiques noires qu'ils avaient engrossées. (pp. 184–85)

This abandoned chamber is another marker of the most extreme biopolitical control, a thanatopolitical device built to facilitate the murder of both mother and unborn child, which stands as a horrific physical monument to the inhumanity of slavery. In addition, it underscores how women, under plantation slavery, were repeatedly reduced to a sexual function, subjected to sexual violence and rape. This sexual function also rendered the woman all the more vulnerable, as in this case, when a pregnancy leads to murder. The

account is not softened for the ears of a child, and it presents the slave woman's body as sexually accessible and, along with her unborn child, ultimately expendable for the white master. Unusually for *récits d'enfance*, here it is the child's father (not the mother or grandmother) who plays a significant role in transmitting this traumatic memory, and with it, initiating the child into the horror of the slave past. Most strikingly, there is no discussion at all of indentureship or of how and why the Indian community came to be in Martinique. Francophone Caribbean *récits d'enfance* share a preoccupation with the unspoken slave history, tracing a series of 'scenes of recognition', in which there is an incomplete exchange where 'the child formulates a question which begs an answer that discusses the slave past. Crucially, any such discussion is repeatedly postponed or withheld, as questions are met with silence' (Hardwick 2013: 16–17). Yet in *Le Petit Coolie noir*, at no point does Maurice question the conditions or circumstances which brought his family to the island, suggesting that just as slavery is rarely willingly discussed by parents in childhood memoirs by African Caribbean authors, a similar taboo existed in the Indian Caribbean community regarding the discussion of indentureship.

What constitutes 'un roman indien'?

The experimental psychologist Juliette Sméralda-Amon, author of a major study on Indian immigration to the Antilles, has commented that *Le Petit Coolie noir* 'n'est pas un roman indien à proprement parler [...] l'on trouve plusieurs références au stigmatisme que constitue le fait d'être "coolie", mais l'auteur n'y défend aucune cause indienne' (Sméralda-Amon 2004). Yet her appraisal unfairly dismisses the considerable engagement with the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean present in Virassamy's text. At several points, this presence is expressed through Maurice's despondent knowledge that

he is lacking an authentic first-hand connection with Indian culture, in a manner reminiscent of Maryse Condé's admission in her own childhood memoir, *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer* (1999), that she, as a bourgeois child, had a knowledge of Creole culture which was precisely based on the fact that she was *not* allowed to experience it, and so became all the more sensitive to this prohibited culture. For example, when visiting his Indian cousins, who are not mixed race, Maurice laments the fact that he has never been able to attend a Bon Dieu Coolie ceremony:

Certains d'entre eux seulement connaissaient quelques mots d'hindi, mais tous avaient assisté au « Bon Dieu Coolie ». J'avais envie d'y assister aussi, surtout pour voir ces petits hommes noirs marcher sur des lames de coutelas aussi aiguisées que des rasoirs. (p. 63)

The 'Bon Dieu Coolie' is a ceremony of Tamil origin, and its description in *MADRAS: Dictionnaire encyclopédique et pratique de la Martinique* bears striking similarities with Maurice's account:

Cérémonie d'origine tamoule lors de laquelle l'officiant exécute un rituel accompagné de prouesses (danse sur le coutelas, marche sur la braise) au son de tambours originaires d'Inde. La fête, qui est dédiée à un saint pour former un vœu ou pour remercier d'une grâce, s'achève en général par un repas réputé (p. 265).

Although the ceremony is not something Maurice has experienced first hand, he demonstrates an accurate understanding of its nature. His experiences, characterized by an acute awareness of a lack of immediate knowledge, are faithful to the paradoxical position of a minority diasporic mixed-race population of *coolies noirs*, at once belonging and not belonging to the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean. In contrast, in his childhood memoir *Ravines du devant jour*, Confiant's child protagonist, who is African Caribbean with no Indian ancestry, recalls being present at a Bon Dieu coolie ceremony,^{vi} and a chapter of his text is devoted to the relationships between coolies and African Caribbeans, initiating the young Raphaël into Indian culture. Yet Virassamy's text is also an initiation into the more complex position of a mixed-race Indian and African Caribbean child, a position fraught with restrictions, in which cultural transmission is more complicated. This does not make his text less 'Indian'; rather, it provides a more nuanced depiction of a child who finds himself part of an ethnic minority within a wider marginalized group.

Le Petit Coolie noir is also highly significant for its depiction of gender attitudes, as it highlights the plight of the coolie woman. Early in the narrative, Maurice describes how his father beats his mother, focusing on his mother's suffering through the inclusion of harrowing detail. During these regular beatings at the hands of her inebriated husband, his mother would emit, 'une plainte étouffée, une sorte de grognement sourd, qui nous serrait le cœur. Quand le silence de maman durait trop, nous étions effrayés à l'idée de sa mort' (p. 83). For the child, his mother's precarious life is symbolized when, during a holiday walk, he is the only one in his family to notice when she slips and almost falls into a river while heavily pregnant: 'Témoin invisible de ce banal incident qui eût pu lui

coûter la vie, je venais de voir en raccourci l'image même de la vie de ma mère, faite d'abnégation, de soumission et de silence.' (p. 143). Virassamy's attention to gender is all the more important, as the experiences of coolie women have long been subject to a double silencing, which is only now being addressed through the work of academics such as Brinda Mehta (2004) and Gaiutra Bahadur (2013).

At the close of *Le Petit Coolie noir*, Maurice's identity is firmly constructed around two poles: his Indian ancestry, and France. He becomes increasingly proud of a diasporic Indian identity when he learns about Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. The knowledge of such figures leads to a sense that his Indian heritage might, despite the racist taunts he has endured, even confer an advantage over black Martinicans: 'je sus aussi que certains pays ne pouvaient se prévaloir de noms aussi célèbres' (p. 190). However, even now, as a constant victim of his own *métissage*, Maurice finds himself drawn to preferring one racial identity over another: thus the idea that his Indian heritage might actually be more illustrious than his black heritage is seductive. He is still trapped in a manner of thinking that consciously seeks to understand the world through notions of ethnic superiority.

The dawning realization that, rather than being trapped and restricted by the confines of his native island, his identity can be understood through reference to diaspora, alters Maurice's understanding of his place in the world. At the novel's close, Maurice is increasingly aware of a pan-Caribbean Indian identity through an encounter with some Indian men born in Trinidad who sing, in English, 'I want to go back to India' (p. 209). However, interestingly, he does not advocate such a return: 'La solution à tous les problèmes qui m'opposaient aux gens du pays n'est sans doute pas à un retour aux

diverses sources et une démarche dans ce sens n'aurait pour résultat que de diviser le pays en autant de clans' (pp. 190–91); instead, his next journey will be to metropolitan France, thanks to a scholarship. Virassamy's second novel *Ne crachez pas sur Sangaré* (1983) continues where *Le Petit Coolie noir* left off, and probes the question of a tripartite racial identity in metropolitan France. The novel describes the reversal of the Martinican ethnoclass hierarchy in France, where Indians enjoy a socially superior status to their black Antillean counterparts. The Martinican mixed-race hero, Sébastien Mohandas, gives each of his different ethnic identities a name: 'Christophe, qui symbolise l'Europe, Krishna l'Asie et Sangaré l'Afrique' (p. 9). In Europe, it is Sangaré, representative of African ancestry, who according to Mohandas 'a fréquemment besoin de ma protection' (p. 9).

For Virassamy's *coolie noir* characters, the solution to the racism they experience in the Caribbean would appear to be to leave Martinique, and seek out a new life in metropolitan France. The focus is shifted away from the location and circumstances in which their particular kind of *métissage* occurred, and the issue of how to accept and understand a *coolie noir* in Martinique remains unsolved, an almost impossible conundrum. This seems a troubling indictment of the extent to which 'intrigues socio-colo-raciales' (p. 168) pose a challenge to social cohesion in Antillean society.

Conclusions

Moving between *La Panse du chacal* and *Le Petit Coolie noir* offers important insights into the possible paradigm of inclusion offered by *créolité's* emphatic

articulation of racial diversity and *métissage*, but also into the internal processes of exclusion and marginalization which continue to operate within Caribbean and New World societies to undermine this very paradigm. In Latin America, apparently inclusivist ideologies such as *el mestizaje* in the 19th Century have been demonstrated by a number of scholars to be strategies of integration, through which ‘the descendants of the Spanish conquistadors are presented as cleansing and elevating both the indigenous and African populations in Latin America’ and the European heritage is ‘portrayed as ascendant’ (Burke 2008: 35). However, later Hispanophone conceptions of *mestizaje* as used by intellectual figures such as the Cuban author and politician José Martí do place an emphasis on cross-cultural hybridity, transfer, creation, negotiation and other spaces of exchange, which Francophone critics such as J. Michael Dash and Amaryll Chanady have seen as fundamental to arriving at a wider contextualization of the *créolité* movement and understandings of different conceptualizations of *métissage* in a pan-Caribbean space.

Créolité strives to depict hybridity by means of one inclusive label, Creole, yet the authors of *Créolité* themselves constantly use an array of secondary ethnic terms within this umbrella term of Creole such as (to name the most frequent examples) *béké*, *nègre*, *chabin*, *mulâtre*, *câpresse* and *coolie*, and appear unable to resolve this paradox within their own theoretical approach. What all these characters do have in common is the Creole language and a shared geography. In this respect, it should be understood that what are ostensibly ethnic markers actually more often than not come to define socio-economic differences, conditioning the reader to be sensitive to the status a character may or may not enjoy in society. Again, it is Maignan-Claverie’s identification of the socio-economic significance of ‘ethnoclasse’ which appears highly significant for any de-

codifying of these terms. Considering the biopolitical dimensions of the ethnoclass hierarchy permits a fresh awareness of the governance of populations at a global level, revealing transoceanic migration patterns and the reduction of human beings to bare life, stripped of political agency, as well as providing new insights into the plantation itself, a microcosm where biopolitical devices have shaped the ways in which race and status are codified.

So strongly ingrained are the negative connotations of the term coolie, that in the current era, it has been rejected by the community it represents, and Indianité (Indianness), is now preferred (as shown by the local association names ‘Journées de l’Indianité 2013’ and ‘L’Association Culturelle Martinique Inde’). In a development which strongly echoes *Négritude*’s reclaiming of the term *nègre*, the Mauritian poet and theorist Khal Tourabully has advanced his theory of *Coolitude*, a philosophy evident throughout his work which finds its most concise expression in his co-published anthology *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2002); the striking choice of subtitle is a strategy designed to highlight the biopolitical factors which led to this diaspora.

In addition, the presence of Indians in the Caribbean is increasingly garnering media and academic attention in an economic context. Jean-Claude Beaujour, an international lawyer with Guadeloupean origins, published an article in the Martinican edition of *France-Antilles* calling on France to optimize the presence of the Indian diaspora on French soil, to secure new investment and trade opportunities:

L'Inde a une politique de PIO, persons of indian origine [sic], de travail sur la diaspora. Elle entend désormais se développer et bâtir des relations avec des étrangers d'origine indienne. Ils sont 500 000 en France avec la Réunion, la Martinique et la Guadeloupe. [...] L'outre-mer peut servir de plateforme avancée pour conquérir ces marchés (Beaujour 2013: 11).

Beaujour is the author of *Et si la France gagnait la bataille de la mondialisation*, a politico-economic essay which calls on France to draw on its strategic overseas presence in a globalized era. Should this come to pass, the global role of the Indian Diaspora community in France may be set to shift once again in the twenty-first century; indeed, India's PIO policy would itself repay further analysis through a biopolitical framework.

* * *

Le Petit Coolie noir presents a child who is struggling against the cultural consequences of centuries of biopolitical control which still shape and go some way to 'explaining' his status in the ethnoclass hierarchy, the racism he encounters and the frequent dehumanizing taunts of *coolie mangé chien*. His situation has not been made any easier by *métissage* – Antillean society remains conditioned to react to him with hostility. Confiant's literary aspirations in *La Panse du chacal* for a new all-encompassing inclusive Creole identity thus appear too simplistic; Virassamy's text provides multiple examples of Caribbean Creole societies taking a markedly less positive view of racial difference. However, by depicting the biopolitical mechanisms which have created French Caribbean society, both texts succeed in casting light on the situation of the coolies and begin to carve out an important space for them in literary discourse.

It is not enough to discuss coolie migration and immigration solely with reference to history, memory and identity. Approaching literature about the coolie experience and the ethnoclass hierarchy from the angle of biopolitics brings the economic or political aspects of their transnational globalized narratives to the fore. The coolies' situation can be more completely explored as a manifestation of Agamben's 'bare life', a mode of investigation which focuses on the migrations, flows and material conditions which characterized Indian immigration, and which directs closer attention to processes of animalization, man as automaton, women reduced to their sexual and/or reproductive function; in short, processes by which human beings are systematically dehumanized in the name of capitalist exploitation.

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ⁱⁱ <http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe?11;s=3325681440;r=1;nat=;sol=0;> [accessed 18/06/14]

ⁱⁱⁱ A term used by Werner Sollers and quoted by Doris Garraway (Garraway 2005b: 230).

^{iv} All statistics in this section are from Vertovec and can be found in 'Table 3.1: Indentured Indian Migration to the Caribbean' (Vertovec 1995: 59).

^v Space does not permit a fuller comparison here, but for an account of indentureship in the Indian Ocean see Hubert Gerbeau (1986), Brinda Mehta (2010) and Véronique Bragard (2010).

^{vi} An episode which Confiant also recounts in an interview, 'Les Kouli [sic] ont toujours fait partie de mon monde' (Benoist et al 2004: 54–55).